

‘Our Language Problem’ As Seen and Solved By Gandhi

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Abstract:

As we mark the centenary of the onset of discourse on linguistic unification initiated by Mahatma Gandhi in the undivided India, we are still engulfed in the disparities betrothed to language. Today, we have 22 official languages of national importance but none that is conferred the status of being called the National Language of India.

Though Gandhi respected and appreciated the provincial languages, he did not accord any of them the national language or ‘*Rashtrabhasha*’ status. He reiterated that “Hindi or *Hindustani* or even Urdu, could be and was the only possible common medium”. ‘*Hindustani*’ is the amalgamation of Hindi and Urdu, which are both not two, but one language with only the difference of scripts, Devanagari and Persian respectively. It was considered to be the most suitable choice for lingua franca of the diverse Indian nation by Gandhi. Incidentally, the same solution is as plausible as it was hundred years ago. The paper will delve deeper into this very “language problem” which has resisted winds of change but changed anyway.

Key Words: Linguistic unification, Lingua franca, *Hindustani*, Language problem

“Our language is the reflection of ourselves, and if you tell me that our languages are too poor to express the best thought, then I say that the sooner we are wiped out of existence, the better for us”¹. Gandhi’s sentiment in this statement as well as in his book titled ‘*Our Language Problem*’, is his well-thought remark on how he viewed language as a victual for

¹Gandhi, M.K. *Towards New Education*. Navjivan Trust, 1953, pp.59.

human existence. Language, plainly and universally, facilitates communication, but more than that, it renders a generic identity to every specific user of the language. This genericity owes its currency to the nation's culture which is so closely associated to and embedded in the nation's language that the verbal and written expression of the culture can be considered language and most certainly, vice-versa. In the case of India, from times immemorial to the present day, it is unquestionably the state of multi-culturalism as well as multi-lingualism. Both these phenomena find great impetus in India which is hugely diverse and diversely huge. But Gandhi believed in reconciling and transcending these linguistic, religious and cultural diversities which at times tended to obscure our national identity.

Tracing the veracity of multiplicity from the times of Gandhi who celebrated the co-existence of certain heterogeneous communities, numerous regions, several religions, multitude of castes and customs as well as an array of vernacular languages, he took pride in the diverse culture of the then Golden Bird. He averred "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization"² that the heterogeneity was a celebration, not a compromise in the face of unity which he opined could be achieved by linguistic unification.

Gandhi, in effect, gave a lot of importance to the language being a key to independence of the nation from British Raj. As Peter Brock says, "Gandhi was primarily a man of action, but he never underestimated the power of words. Thus, we need not be surprised that throughout most of his adult life he was intensely interested in the development of India's literary languages. These tongues, which had sunk into varying states of moribundity by the outset of the nineteenth century, had then been forced to retreat before the advance of the English language sponsored by India's foreign rulers"³. Gandhi firmly held that language needs to be imbued with spirit if we were to become free from foreign rule. To put it in his words, "we cannot get the freedom we want through foreign language, for the simple reason that we are not able to use it effectively"⁴.

Gandhi reasoned that if English were to be our national language, it needs to be taught as a compulsory subject in the schools. Pondering over the issue of English as the national language, Gandhi firmly held that it cannot occupy that status for a number of reasons. The pre-requisites for a language to be accorded the national status, as put forward by Gandhi, were that, one, it should be easy to learn for government officials. Two, it should be capable

²Gandhi, Mahatma. *Peace: The Words and Inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi*. Blue Mountain Press, 2007, pp.34.

³Brock, Peter. *Mahatma Gandhi As A Linguistic Nationalist*. South Asia Publications, 1995, pp. 129.

⁴Gandhi, M.K. *Thoughts on National Language*. Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1956.

of serving as a medium of religious, economic and political intercourse throughout India. Three, it should be easy to learn for the whole of the country and lastly, that in choosing this language, considerations of temporary or passing interest should not count.

English failed to pass this litmus test at multiple levels and was thus unfit to become the national language of India, apart from the fact that it's not an Indian language and thus will never become people's own. Gandhi took a dim view of the very idea of making English the national language as a "sign of weakness". He condemned "the shameful spectacle of congressmen insisting on speaking in English and compelling others to do likewise". Gandhi found the English language as an impediment in the progress of India towards her goal of *Swaraj* or 'self-rule'. He strongly believed that the neglect of our provincial languages amounted to nothing short of our disservice to the nation. If the large component of the masses were to understand the significance of *Swaraj*, no other language except their mother-tongue is potent enough to convey the message to them. *Swaraj*, as Gandhi felt, is based on non-violence. Through non-violence, "an individual makes his own direct contribution to the Independence Movement. The masses cannot do this fully unless they understand every step with all its implications. This is impossible unless every step is explained in their own language"⁵.

With the advent of the British and the usage of English language as the official language for communication, the vernacular languages of India were relegated to the background to which Gandhi found the solution of *Rashtrabhsha* or a National Language, which for obvious reasons could not be English. Alternatively, "a fear had been expressed, observed Gandhi, that the propagation of *Rashtrabhsha* or the national tongue would prove inimical to the provincial languages. That fear, he said, was rooted in ignorance. Provincial tongues provided the sure foundation on which the edifice of the national tongue should rest. The two were intended to complement, not supplant each other"⁶.

Gandhi felt that it was a national necessity to recognise Hindi as the national language. In 1917, Gandhi defined Hindi as "that language which Hindus and Muslims in the North speak and which is written either in the Devanagari or Persian script, that Hindi, *Hindustani* and Urdu are different names for the same speech"⁷. "In 1920, in the wake of the Rowlatt *Satyagraha* and the onset of the Khilafat Movement, Gandhi became the

⁵Gandhi, M.K. *Our Language Problem*. Edited by Anand T. Hingorani. Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1956.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid. pp.9.

unquestioned leader of the Indian National Congress. At the Nagpur Congress, the discussion was all about non-cooperation, but along with that, and without extensive discussion, it also discussed Gandhi's ideas about language owing to which the local and provincial subdivisions of the Congress, which were to be much more active and ongoing under Gandhi's leadership, were entirely redefined along linguistic lines, virtually the same lines that were to become the basis for Independent India many years later with the States Reorganization Act of 1956.”⁸

The recognition of linguistic provinces, reiterated in the Nehru Report of 1927, was consistent with Gandhi's own advocacy and devotion to Gujarati, even as he supported Hindi or *Hindustani* as the national language, the language that would take the place of English for communication among Indians of different linguistic backgrounds. In that spirit, Gandhi campaigned most vigorously for Hindi in the south, establishing in 1927, the *Hindi Prachar Sabha*, a network of teachers and a body of instructional materials aimed at teaching Hindi to speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam, all in the name of patriotism and national service. Ignoring anti-Hindi sentiment in Tamil Nadu, Gandhi argued that the common Hindi vocabulary would serve to bind the languages of India together. At the same time, Gandhi advocated that all Indian languages be written in the same script, Devanagari, in order to make them easier to learn. He said, “The Dravidians being in a minority, should learn the common language of the rest of India than the rest should learn Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam in order to be able to converse with Dravidian India... Let no Dravidian think that learning Hindi is at all difficult. A little time taken from the recreation hour daily and in a systematic manner will enable an average man to learn Hindi in one year”. Further he states that “our greatest assembly cannot be a real object lesson to the masses unless it speaks to them in a language which the largest number can understand. I appreciate the difficulty of the Dravidians, but nothing is difficult before their industrious love for the Motherland”⁹.

In his 1935 speech to the *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* (HSS), he stated the matter clearly: the ultimate linguistic order of India should be “to use the language of the province in the province, to use Hindi for all-India purposes and to use English for international purposes.”¹⁰ Finally, in 1942, Gandhi decided that the term Hindi had become irretrievably bound up with hostility to Urdu, so he shifted entirely to “*Hindustani*,” forming a new

⁸Lelyveld, David. "Words As Deeds: Gandhi And Language". *The Annual Of Urdu Studies*, vol. 16, 2001. Accessed 20 Nov 2019.

⁹ Gandhi, Mahatma. *Young India 1919-22*. S. Ganesan, Madras, 1924.

¹⁰Gandhi, M.K. *India of My Dreams*. Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1947. pp. 194-95.

organization, the *Hindustani Prachar Sabha* (HPS), and resigning, after much private and public negotiation, from the *Hindi Sahitya Sammelan* (HSS).

However, at the hour of independence or what is also called Partition, among other major and grave things that happened, Hindi was declared the first official language, and attempts were made to declare Hindi the sole national language of India. Due to protests from Tamil Nadu and other non-Hindi-speaking states, it was decided to temporarily retain English for official purposes until at least 1963. But the dissemination and functionality of the English language was so widespread that fifteen years later, the Official Languages Act 1963 stated “Notwithstanding the expiration of the period of fifteen years from the commencement of the Constitution, the English language may continue to be used in addition to Hindi for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before that day; and for the transaction of business in Parliament, and that the English language shall be used for purposes of communication between the Union and a State which has not adopted Hindi as its Official Language.”¹¹

Remarkably, the linguistic reorganization of more than five hundred princely states in 1947 from the time that it was conceived by Congress Party in 1917, having met agitation, urgency and all other kinds of considerations in the New and Divided India, finally transpired with the birth of first linguistic state of Andhra with the Telugu speaking people in 1953. This paved the way for acceptance of recommendations by the Fazl Commission which created 14 linguistically identified states and 6 union territories under the States Reorganization Act of 1956. The process of bifurcation of states on the basis of language continued till November 2000 with 28 states and 7 Union territories. However, presently India has 9 Union territories and 28 states, a change as recent as August 2019 which is still finding ways through doubts and acceptance.

Having said all that and tracing the impact and importance of language through all the prodigious breakthroughs in the history and present of India, the fact that India still doesn't have any one national language, and rather has 2 Official Languages, Hindi and English, and 22 Scheduled Languages of national importance as part of the Eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution, has its historic, temporal and future implications.

The issue of National language has been an undying debate in the course of the consolidation of a unified national identity. “Concept of nation-state and nationalism were originally based

¹¹Constitution of India. Official Language Act, 1963.

on some kind of uniformity in the matter of race, ethnicity, culture, language, et cetera, but language was underlined as one of the most efficient elements in this regard. This concept of nation-state was satisfactorily applicable in the matters of small state. However, when applied to larger countries with heterogeneity in the demographic make-up, this concept proved inadequate in diluting the friction emerging out of identity politics.”¹²

The idea that one language represents a nation is one of the legacies of colonialism. The complex process of modern nation building in colonial countries involved questions of cultural unity. It is ironic that our animosity towards English makes us blind to the fact that English gave us the idea of a singular nation: One nation, one language. At no time in the history of the Subcontinent was there a need to showcase national unity through one language or one culture until after colonialism. Gandhi was quite confident about this solution, as he wrote in 1948, “I may be alone today in my belief, but it is obvious that ultimately it is neither Sanskritised Hindi nor Persianized Urdu which will win. It is only *Hindustani* which will win ultimately.”¹³ But given the current insistence on Hindi, and not *Hindustani*, the nation has anyway drifted away from what is still being claimed as Mahatma’s dream.

“All totalitarian regimes — communist, militarist, right-wing or even social-welfarist — seem to share an anxiety about plurality. For, that could lead to questions being asked from the powers that be. Plurality is chaos, while a unitary entity is controllable. Given this, should Hindi sustain the burden of the country’s history, its people, and their contesting cultures? What exactly is “Hindi”? Modern standard Hindi evolved from the interaction of early speakers of Khari Boli with speakers of different languages from the northern part of the Subcontinent and elsewhere. Although the current push is for a standardised and Sanskritised Hindi, spoken Hindi has largely been influenced by Persian — and then English, among other languages.”¹⁴

While Gandhi’s attempt was to “harness linguistic self-determination for the independence movement”,¹⁵ the unsettling question today then is if we are saying that after 72 years of

¹²Teli, Ganpat. “Revisiting the Making of Hindi as a ‘National’ Language”. *Language in India*. Vol. 12, no.1, January, 2012. www.languageinindia.com. Accessed on 17 Nov 2019.

¹³Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Penguin Gandhi Reader*. Edited by Rudranshu Mukherjee. Penguin India, 2010.

¹⁴Dechamma, Sowmya. “Idea of one country, one language was bequeathed to us by colonialists”. *The Indian Express*. 20 September, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/hindi-imposition-one-nation-one-language-6011348/>. Accessed on 21 Nov 2019.

¹⁵Friedrich, Paul. “Language and Politics in India.” *Daedalus*, vol. 91, no. 3, Summer 1962, pp. 543–559. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20026727. Accessed on 21 Nov 2019.

independence, the country is not united enough. What is it that divides India that the country needs a unifying factor that can only be a language? An American linguist, Nancy Dorian's words are an apt manifestation of every non-Hindi speaker of India: "A good many people, especially those who speak unthreatened languages, are likely to have trouble imagining that they themselves could ever be brought to the point of giving up on their own ancestral language and encouraging their children to use some other language instead"¹⁶.

To re-invoke the words of Gandhi within the same line of thought but in a different light will aptly summate this discourse on the language problem. He had said "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization."¹⁷ And the fundamental of unity in diversity can become and will remain a celebrated affair only if we let all the variegated cultures, communities and languages thrive in their own right, time and space.

¹⁶Dorian, Nancy. *Investigating Variation: The Effects of Social Organization and Social Setting*. OUP, 2009. pp. 219.

¹⁷Gandhi, Mahatma. *Peace: The Words and Inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi*. Blue Mountain Press, 2007, pp. 34.